

## Tom Russell In the Heart of the Folk Hotel

review by Peter Stone Brown

It would be easy to say that Tom Russell's new album *Folk Hotel* (Frontera Records) is a tribute to the Greenwich Village folk music scene of the '60s, and let it go at that, except this album is like a summoning of the spirit of the ghosts of that period and equally important the feel, musically and lyrically. It is not the kind of album where one track sticks out above the others because all the songs and the playing are on an high equal level. Each song could be considered a room in that hotel, and in those rooms are side trips to the Southwest, Wales, Belfast and Copenhagen that could be dreams, but maybe not.

The Village Russell sings about is long gone. The buildings are still there, but it was over when the first McDonald's opened followed by a succession of chain stores. Maybe walking the winding streets on the west side of Sixth Avenue, you can find the remnants of those ghosts and the feel of the place when there was "music in the cafes at night and revolution in the air."

Russell is a compelling storyteller, and one of his greatest strengths is the way he puts his own experiences into songs you initially think are about something else. He also leaves a lot to the power of suggestion. Detailed as some of the songs may be, he leaves enough room for the listener to form a picture in their own mind.

Much of the album's charm is in the instrumentation and the sounds of the instruments, whether it's Russell's finger-picked acoustic guitar, Redd Volkaert's subtle electric leads or Joel Guzman's accordion. The expert picking itself a tribute a wide variety of sources. Vocally, Russell is often channeling, sometimes specific singers, but more often the essence of those singers.

*Folk Hotel* is anything but nostalgic. It is not saying, oh gee, wasn't it great when all those people would sing nice songs in coffeehouses. It's an album about pursuing art and creating magic, and that the people creating that art and bringing often ancient songs to life were not necessarily living easy lives, but quite often lives of desperation.

Russell also shows a deep understanding about how folk music works. "Rise Again, Handsome Johnny," a song in part about JFK's assassination, but also about how Russell had to play a football game that weekend is not set to a reverent melody, but to a tune similar to Mississippi John Hurt's "Stagolee," but such songs as Riley Puckett's "McKinley" (covered in a well-known

version by the Greenbriar Boys, or “Mr. Garfield’s Been Shot Down” weren’t exactly mournful.

Perhaps Russell’s greatest achievement is that by writing about then, he’s really writing about now as songs such as “Harlan Clancy” and “The Last Time I Saw Hank” make clear. What happened during that actually brief period in the Village was also happening elsewhere on a smaller scale. The climate that permitted that era to thrive is long gone, and when it does happen, it’s quickly wiped out by gentrification.

The album includes two bonus tracks. The first is a fine finger-picked cover of Dylan’s “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” sung in a duet with Joe Ely, with Joel Guzman on accordion. Alternating verses, Russell and Ely sing it like they lived it. The second is “Scars On His Ankles,” a song about the great Texas blues singer, Sam Lightnin’ Hopkins, but (typically of this album) it’s also about Texas journalist, Grover Lewis, who was one of the best writers *Rolling Stone* published. With Max De Bernardi providing Lightnin’ styled guitar, and interspersing singing with talking parts, some from Lewis’ writing, Russell spins the story of the time they met.

Available with, but not included in the album is a Lyrics Book, that includes Russell’s notes on the songs, stories of people such as Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Ian Tyson and Leonard Cohen, each song and story illustrated by a Russell Painting. It is beautifully done with Russell’s notes making the origins of each song quite clear. It is available as a bundle (or separately) at the [Frontera Records](#) site.

Earlier this year Russell released *Play One More: The Songs of Ian & Sylvia* (True North). Ian & Sylvia were by far the greatest folk duo of the ’60s. Unlike a lot of the groups of that period, they weren’t about singing rousing versions of “Michael Row The Boat Ashore.” They seriously explored traditional folk music, including the folk music of their country, Canada, and delved into blues and country as well. Their albums always featured great guitar work, stunning and original harmonies, and early on they started writing songs such as “Four Strong Winds,” “You Were On My Mind” and “Summer Wages.” Long before anyone knew who Gram Parsons was, Ian & Sylvia were mixing up folk, rock and country music, always with the best players. Bob Dylan did several of their songs on *The Basement Tapes*, and revisited “The French Girl” in rehearsals with The Grateful Dead.

Working with vocalist Cindy Church and guitarist Grant Siemens, Russell leaves off the songs mentioned above in favor of album tracks from their fifth album *So Much For Dreaming* on, including many of my favorite songs including “Wild Geese,” “The Renegade,” “Play One More” and “Rio Grande.” Russell has worked with both singers, both playing and writing. He understands what they did and he has it down, to the extent that there

are times on this album, that if I didn't know what it was, I would think I was hearing an Ian & Sylvia outtake. One of the songs is one he co-wrote with Ian Tyson, "When The Wolves No Longer Sing."

At the end of the disc are two bonus tracks of Ian & Sylvia demos of "Grey Morning" and "The French Girl."